

# The History of Barrios Unidos

Healing Community Violence

*Cultura Es Cura*



**Frank de Jesús Acosta**

**EDITED BY Henry A.J. Ramos**

**WITH A FOREWORD BY Luis J. Rodríguez,**  
*author of La Vida Loca: Always Running*



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Arte Público Press  
Houston, Texas

This volume is made possible through grants from Barrios Unidos, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the City of Houston through the Houston Arts Alliance, the Exemplar Program, a program of Americans for the Arts in collaboration with the LarsonAllen Public Services Group, funded by the Ford Foundation, the James Irvine Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation.

*Recovering the past, creating the future*

University of Houston  
Arte Público Press  
452 Cullen Performance Hall  
Houston, Texas 77204-2004

Cover design by Exact Type  
Cover art by Rene Garcia

Jesús Acosta, Frank de.

The History of Barrios Unidos: Healing Community Violence / by  
Frank de Jesús Acosta; foreword by Luis Rodríguez.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-55885-483-3

1. Urban violence—California—Santa Cruz—Prevention.  
2. Community organization—California—Santa Cruz. 3. Political  
participation—California—Santa Cruz. 4. Communication in  
community  
development—California—Santa Cruz. 5. Santa Cruz (Calif.)—Social  
conditions. I. Title.

HN80.S26J47 2007

303.6'90979471—dc22

2006051751

CIP

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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Printed in the United States of America

7 8 9 0 1 2 3 4 5 6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

# Dedication

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Dedicado a mis padres María de Jesús Acosta y Luis Barrios García and my siblings Carmen, Henry, and Joe for their love and spirit. Para toda mi familia de sangre y de espíritu—beloved nephews and nieces, mis tíos, tías y primos de la familia Fonseca, my twelve godchildren y mis estimados compadres. To my tío José “Chavito” Fonseca, who stepped up to be a father when I needed one. Thanks to Luz Vega-Marquis, Gary Yates, Tom David, Gwen Foster, and Antonio Manning for believing.

Special thanks and blessings go to Henry “Kiki” Ramos and Rubén “Ray” Lizardo, first for their brotherhood and love, second for their critically important contributions to the editing and writing of this book. The love, hope, faith, and humanity of el movimiento remain the cornerstone of our carnalismo. Special thanks to research fellows George Galvis, Claudia De La Rosa, and Venice Williams, the support team of Tawnya Lewis-Mason, Jamie Hilao, Amanda Quintero, Ceylida López, Roberto De La Rosa, Hiranya Brewer, and artists Anthony Rene Garcia and Frankie Alejándrez. Gracias to Luis Rodríguez, Gabriela Baeza Ventura, Dolores Huerta, Harry Belafonte, Connie Rice, Tom Hayden, and Manuel Pastor for their contributions.

Gracias Willie B., Sam Law, Johnjohn P., Ray y Abby, Kiki y Claudia, Primo Oscar, Rolling Stone and Tawnya, Serena M., Mariano y Ruby, Ruben G-2Dogs y Sarah, Sylvia B., Peter N., Bong-Jonah, Stewart K., Cecilia S., Michael-Hootie, Phillip y Jason K., Richard V., Mama Cora and Helen, Boo2, Leonor, Steve y Vannia, Arturo-Congo, Angel Z., Antonio M., Turie V., Roberto L., Waterbug, Sky, Blanca, Bear, Greg-Kudu, Steve-Tiger, Michael L., Brian-Babycakes, Ronnie de la Calle, Ernie G-Wintergardens, Juliamaba, J. Marcial, Magdalena y Frankie, Fr. Kiki Smolich, Pastor M. Fink, Fr. G-Dog Boyle, L. Rodríguez, Tom-Big Mountain, Wayne S., Anthony C., Irma R., Sandra G., Susan A., Linda B., Susan N., Debbie C., Jai Lee, Linda W., Gwen

F., Fran J., Angela S., Larry A., Paul V., Jaime R., Connie R., Joe H., Gary-Monk, Marisa A., Cindy C., Benny T., Denise F., Gary D., Winston D., Frank G., Skid-Graciela, Tony G., Tim N., Berky N., Victor R., Marlan O., UCLA MEChA, Mike (Nikayla/Trista) Adair, and the JT's gang. Las familias Acosta, García, Fonseca, Palumbo, Bamish, Mason, Lizardo-Rincón, Ramos-Camacho, Díaz, Ruíz, Abaigar, Law, Kobayashi, Nishita, Verches, Kallio, Delgadillo, Balaoing, Shibuya, Chu, Pond, Procello, Jung, Almeida, Ten-Houston, Alejándrez, Quintero, Ayala, Domínguez, Ybarra, Gonzales, Manning, Kim, and Zapata.

Para Nane y Jenny, OT y Sonia, Elder Henry, Walter Firekeeper, Liz, Lulu, Monico, Los Albinos, Vampira, Los Manuels, Rip-Richard, Mitch, Caranina, Shawnalle, Amanda, George, Joaquín, Anthony, Las Teresas, Chemo, Ted, Wayne, Jaime, Yvonne, Roberto, Claudia, Ceyleida, Leslie, Manny, Hiranya, Jim, Tío Alberto, Marko, Frank V., Nghia, Magdaleno RA, Dr. Loco, Edward James Olmos, Danny Glover, Hari Dillon, Victor G., Ida H., Patricia P., Len B., and all Peace Warriors and Adelitas of the Barrios Unidos family not mentioned but remembered. To Gaylord, Baba Dodley, Mae, Shed, Venice, Sean, Jerome, Amy, Harvard, Greg, Jcohn, Khalid, Haatim, Kwabena, Brandon, Ernest, Kyle, Steve, Deamon, Busi, Desmond, Regi, Jerod, Tywan, Eddie, Craig, Fonde, Rhatib, C.J., and all of the elders' circles, nation builders-warrior poets, and Simba Nation. *Ashe!*

To Syd Beane and Floyd “Red Crow” Westerman for the blessing of my first sweat lodge. Amor y gracias to my uncle and spiritual guide, Henry Domínguez. To my circle of friends and colleagues who have waited patiently for me to return from this journey—the Watts Century Latino Organization, the Institute for Community Peace, the Los Angeles Multicultural Collaborative, and the Liberty Hill Foundation.

In loving memory of William Acosta, Paula Avalos, Samuel Law, Florence Bamish, Oscar Soto Jr., Fran Díaz, Father Luis Oliveras, Danny Verches, Linda Mitchell, Freddie Ramírez, Carlos Ruíz, Michael Ruíz, Ralph Abascal, Peter Pond, Manuel Martínez Jr., Ted Jefferson, Walter Guzmán, and those most recently departed—Naiche Domínguez, Jr., Rubén Gregorio Maldonado, Frank del Olmo, Ray Gatchalian, Corky Gonzales, Bert Corona, Coretta Scott King, Lalo Delgado, and Marco Firebaugh. To all the homies and innocent souls fallen from or heartbroken by barrio warfare.

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## Editor's Note by Henry A.J. Ramos

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As a young person growing up in California, I learned early on about the culture of gangs and the institutional inequities that give rise to them. I was comfortably protected from these realities on account of my business-owning, middle-class family's decision to reside on the relatively posh west side of Los Angeles. This largely shielded me from the meaner streets of East Los Angeles and South Central and ensured that I would attend some of the city's better public schools. Nevertheless, I occasionally bumped up against the gang life—*la vida loca* of homeboys and homegirls all around southern California. I found urban gangsters of various kinds by virtue of my interests and my sense of social responsibility, being one of relatively few Chicanos back then who was privileged.

Even on the higher-end west side of L.A. we had Chicano gangs. Those known as "Sotel" in West Los Angeles, the Venice "13" gangs, and various overlapping or competing gang families in Santa Monica and Culver City were highly active. Throughout my youth these groups were constant sources of oversight and control by local school authorities and police. They were also periodic threats to my scholarly and sports-centered orientation, which to the gang-bangers I knew seemed to make me both a curiosity and a source of pride. On occasion, they would mock me for being "too white," but they also treated me with a surprising degree of respect for my sense of license and my success in Anglo society. Other than me, they did not know other Chicanos who had been socially and academically successful. Out of deference, they kept their distance from me, notwithstanding occasional signs of disdain for my inclination to play in the *gavacho* world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Gavacho* is Spanish for one who is "other"; in contemporary Chicano parlance it is typically used as an insulting reference to white European Americans.

When school officials at my elite and largely white high school fell onto problems managing warring gang sets on and near campus, they called upon me to intervene. At a meeting they assembled with Chicano gang students, the hardened Latino youth showed stony stares when asked by the administrators why they would not participate in school academic and social activities, like other students: why they always seemed rather to want to remain on the side or to party and fight. In the deafening silence that ensued, I spoke up. Administration executives, who knew me as a campus leader and model student, were surprised to hear me assert that the school was not creating an inviting environment for Chicano youth. Listing a long line of concerns that I had gleaned from observation and just a few pre-meeting conversations with the Latino students, I implored the school administration and faculty to take greater initiative. I encouraged them to reach out to Chicano students, to become more engaged in the local Latino community, to consider hiring more Latino staff, and to add teaching content to the school curriculum that was relevant to Chicano youth. When the meeting ended, the Chicano gang leaders in attendance came over and quietly thanked me for saying what they felt but could not express.

In my pursuits as a student-athlete, I came to know many communities in the Greater Los Angeles basin, owing to team tours that took me to football games and basketball tournaments in which I competed all around town. My travels exposed me to gangs in virtually every community of color in southern California. The Chicano gangs on the east side of Los Angeles were even more active than the ones where I lived. They were more numerous and more violent too. Their frequent knife and gun battles, and the level of their members' dislocation from mainstream culture, were constantly lamented in local news reports. But, from what I saw firsthand in my travels around the city, the socioeconomic conditions that produced these alienated youths were obviously inequitable. Seeing these conditions up close helped me to understand the gang youths' pent up rage and hopelessness. Asian and African American gangs that I encountered along the way were similarly informed by the harsh living conditions that faced their members and families.



When I went away to college to the University of California at Berkeley in northern California, I became exposed to racial and ethnic gangs across the state. Over and over again, at each encounter with young people living the gang life, I saw similar patterns. Poverty and dislocation were driving factors leading the youth to seek protection and place in gangs. Official reaction and policy was heavily implicated in this. Teachers, police, and social workers—authority figures of all types—were frequently directing these kids toward life's edge, sometimes by design and other times out of sheer ignorance. Too many of the adult figures talked down to the youth rather than with them. Many of the authorities blindly tracked kids into dead-end educational and job programs, often without any diagnostic testing or attention to the young people's interests. Most of the elders misunderstood or disregarded the youths' history and culture. In these ways, the powers that be set up a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure for minority adolescents and teens throughout the system.

The decades following my early exposure to gang culture produced even much harsher realities and outcomes. A combination of disinvestments from state educational and youth recreational programs, economic decline in many inner cities, and massive population increases in the nation's minority communities produced greater gang activity and social dislocation than ever. A disturbing rise in gun- and drug-related violence followed, reaching by the early 1990s unprecedented proportions. Burgeoning incidents of community violence and resulting impacts on emergency and hospital intensive care personnel compelled state authorities to declare the situation a public health crisis. In California, the problems were as bad as anywhere in the United States, and Chicano gangs were heavily involved in the worst of it.

Public reaction was crushing as voters elected a majority of conservative lawmakers who in turn instituted some of the most draconian policy responses imaginable. As a result, the imprisonment of Latino and African American youth and young adults skyrocketed to the point where the prison populations of color began to surpass the populations of these groups in schools and where public investment in new prison construction began to surpass expenditures not only for new school facilities but also for some basic social services and

almost all violence prevention programs. Against this backdrop, relatively few grassroots advocates on behalf of affected minority youth had the capacity or the vision to step into the breach and lead a response. The Santa Cruz-based organization known as Barrios Unidos (BU) was one of the few that did. Its subsequent work has helped to model what effective violence prevention and social justice leadership can look like in the modern era.

This book tells Barrios Unidos's compelling story. It underscores the organization's focus on the humanity within even the most hardcore of gang-banging youths, its attention to culture and redemption, and its commitment to faith. It tells of powerful lessons resulting from this work that policy leaders all across the nation can and should learn from. The Barrios Unidos story is one that shows the power of authentic peer support (the organization's founders and principals are former gang members and offenders themselves). It demonstrates the value of understanding history and learning its lessons. Barrios Unidos's story additionally reflects the importance of spiritual and religious practice, discipline, and steadfastness in the face of adversity. Finally, a careful reading of the Barrios Unidos experience enhances appreciation of the potential for multicultural partnership and understanding: BU's impressive evolution has been marked throughout by numerous key collaborations with Native American, African American, European American, and other racial and ethnic leaders. Taken together, these aspects of the Barrios Unidos story should establish the book that follows as mandatory reading for Americans of all backgrounds who wish to learn how to help America succeed as a functioning multicultural society.

During the mid 1990s, Frank de Jesús Acosta, a former youth leader, immigrant advocate, and community organizer, joined The California Wellness Foundation (TCWF) staff to direct its newly established Violence Prevention Initiative (VPI). The VPI was a nearly \$75 million, decade-long investment program to which TCWF had committed itself in order to help address the epidemic of gang and gun violence that was devastating youth, families, and communities across the state. One of the new program director's early major decisions was to support Barrios Unidos with \$750,000 in multiyear grant funding. BU had only recently established itself as a legal nonprofit corpora-

tion, having operated for over a decade as an unincorporated network. Acosta's early investment in Barrios Unidos was one of the most important gifts ever directed to the violence prevention field. His early support and later close affinity with the organization's founding leaders led him to be asked by those leaders years later to write this story. They trusted him to recount the Barrios Unidos experience with a healthy balance of biased love and objective, informed analysis. Acosta's resulting book provides just this delicate balance.

Barrios Unidos's activities over the years, though not without challenges and setbacks, have produced historic gains for Chicano communities facing institutionalized racism, poverty, and violence. Its public policy advocacy leadership has helped to pass important legislation leading to new investments in gang prevention and intervention programs in the state of California. Its particularly strong partnerships with leading Native American and African American social justice leaders have inspired groundbreaking advancements for U.S. multiracial coalition building. Its development of cutting edge cultural economy programs has established new models in grassroots community enterprise strategy. Finally, its innovative work to bring peace to violence-ridden communities while offering new opportunities for gang-affiliated youth has saved countless lives and families.

Until recently, few observers considered BU to be a civil rights or social justice organization, as such. But its body of work, its intellectual/philosophical inclinations, and its wide following of leading American social justice figures reveals its status as a rights and justice anchor institution. The testimonies provided in this book clearly make the point. The commentators Frank Acosta has assembled herein to shed light on the larger significance of BU's work speaks volumes. These are some of progressive America's most revered and accomplished activists and thinkers. Their observations, coupled with the book's caring treatment and thoughtful analysis of an important history and field make this a special publication, indeed. Owing to these considerations, it is an honor for Arte Público Press to have the opportunity to feature Barrios Unidos in our civil rights history series.

Books like this one play a critical informing role in raising public consciousness and encouraging still-needed social justice reforms. Younger readers—both Hispanic and non-Hispanic—who did not

directly experience the particularly harsh realities that gave rise to organizations like Barrios Unidos should especially benefit from exposure to this story. By reading Acosta's account, they may take into greater consideration than otherwise the merits of playing a supportive role in combating continuing social and economic injustice. They may contemplate pursuing an activist path in law, education, or community and labor organizing. They may furthermore gain insight into how much commitment, patience, and hard work is often required to forge even the most basic advancements in civil and human rights. Finally, they may gain a deeper appreciation of their own privileges and opportunities in contemporary society and a stronger sense of responsibility therefore to assume some leadership in shaping the social justice history still to be made.

The Arte Público Press Hispanic Civil Rights Series that makes this publication possible seeks to educate, inform, and inspire Americans of all backgrounds—and especially younger Americans—by lifting up the United States Latino community's many important contributions to and struggles for justice in America. With support in recent years from funders, including the James Irvine Foundation, the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation, The California Endowment, Carnegie Corporation of New York, and Prudential Financial, the series is producing more than twenty original works by and about many of the leading protagonists of Latino America's post-World War II civil rights history.

Raising awareness about these informing, but still remarkably under-chronicled chapters in U.S. social advancement is more important than ever, as Latinos have emerged to become the nation's new minority of record. With now nearly 40 million individuals comprising the national Hispanic community and a burgeoning youth population that demographers predict will result in fully one in four Americans being of Latino heritage by the year 2050, it is imperative for all citizens and longtime residents of the United States to gain a more evolved comprehension of Hispanic people and for Hispanic Americans themselves (along with their closest friends and allies) to tell the stories of their experiences and social justice contributions over recent decades.

By bringing forward these affirmative stories and the voices of leaders who helped to shape them, Arte Público Press seeks to develop the texture of recorded U.S. history in ways that elevate public recognition of the Hispanic role in defining what it means to be an American. It also hopes to encourage expanded public dialogue about the important continuing social justice work that still needs to be done in Latino and other communities of the United States that confront enduring inequities.

Frank de Jesús Acosta's book, *The History of Barrios Unidos, Healing Community Violence: Cultura Es Cura*, is a truly important addition to our series. The book was largely made possible by a generous grant from the San Francisco-based James Irvine Foundation. We are most indebted to the foundation's president, James E. Canales, for contributing not only to this volume but also to several others that we are currently completing on California Latino and Latina rights leaders. We are additionally grateful to The California Wellness Foundation's Gary Yates for core funding support and to Luz Vega Marquis of the Marguerite Casey Foundation and Stewart Kwoh of the Asian Pacific American Legal Center, whose trustee contributions as board members of The California Wellness Foundation helped to supplement our financial support for this publication. We are also thankful to Gwen Foster and her colleagues at The California Endowment and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation for offering additional supplemental support for the book. Finally, we wish to recognize Hari Dillon and the Vanguard Public Foundation of San Francisco for its support of Frank Acosta's research and project activities that led to this work's ultimate presentation in book form. These partners' assistance provides a shining example of the broad-based collaboration we seek to help us tell the important stories we bring forward through Arte Público Press's work. We are deeply indebted to these and other leaders who have made essential gifts to assist our efforts.

Henry A. J. Ramos  
Executive Editor  
Hispanic Civil Rights Series



## **Foreword by Luis J. Rodríguez**

### ***Yocoxcayotl: The Movement for Peace and Healing Through Barrios Unidos***

---

Peacemakers are not much valued in our culture. What they do takes time. It takes principles. It takes long-winded, often unproductive meetings and tense dialog. It takes immense patience. People with guns often speak louder. They get heard. They get attention—especially from the prized major media that won’t get near a peacemaking process unless blood is shed. Some of those with guns even get paid (many peacemakers I know don’t). It’s sexier to have an army, to have technologically advanced weaponry to threaten and hurt people. Most armies don’t want to fight—but when they do, more gets done than all the talk, meetings, and paperwork that most peace work entails.

War is sweeping, undeniably conclusive, in your face.

And yet, peace happens. It lives. It thrives. Most people in this country are living relatively peaceful lives—most people in the world for that matter. Even in the most violent urban core community, peace gets made. You won’t hear about it too often, but there are peacemakers in our families, schools, churches, workplaces, and even among gangs.

Peacemakers among gangs?

*¡Claro que sí!* You simply wouldn’t have the great lulls between wars or the fact that most gang youths aren’t involved in violence, if this weren’t so. Look at the statistics: 250,000 gang members across the land (that’s one estimate; it ranges from much lower to much higher). But you still aren’t getting 250,000 gang members killing people. Not even a tenth of that. Maybe it’s closer to 1 percent (2,500) in a year. Who really knows—statistics on gang violence and murders are far from exact. Law enforcement agencies have yet to decide what

constitutes a gang killing. Los Angeles and Chicago—by far the cities with the highest incidences of gang violence—don’t even use the same reporting criteria.

Don’t get me wrong: Gangs are a major social problem in this country. When gang members do murder, it destroys families, communities, and our social fabric. It’s so tragic because it’s usually the young who are dying: people cut down in their prime, intelligent, beautiful, young people who leave behind parents, siblings, and friends. Many times innocent people are taken—babies even. The firepower in the streets is the same as what is used in most civil conflicts around the world: AK-47s, Uzis, and more. In Los Angeles alone, gang violence is believed to have taken around 15,000 lives since 1980. It’s also top news. It’s on all the television news shows and newspapers. The truth is, any gang killing is one too many.

But yet, even among gang members, there are peacemakers.

Peacemakers, like the individuals that make up Barrios Unidos. The Barrios Unidos organization is on the frontlines of the urban peace movement in this country—it has been for more than a quarter of a century. Barrios Unidos members are about *Yocoxcayotl*—the Mexican Nahuatl word for the path for peace.

The organization—led by the charismatic Daniel “Nane” Alejándrez—includes gang members, former gang members, and non-gang members. It includes youth, children, parents, workers, teachers, the unemployed, spiritual practitioners, and professional organizers. They’ve been saving lives without much fanfare or accolades for more than twenty-seven years, but they don’t stop.

The recognition Barrios Unidos has received is much appreciated. Its multiple sources of funding help to create schools, computer centers, opportunities for cultural expression, employment, housing, and more. But Barrios Unidos members do this work for something much greater: the love of family, community, culture, and tradition.

The love of life.

Nane Alejándrez is a peacemaker—I would venture to say, one of the most self-sacrificing, dedicated, consistent, and humble peacemakers we have ever seen in the United States, if not the world. He’s a former Chicano gang member and drug addict. He’s a Vietnam War veteran. He bears the scars, tattoos, and the post-traumatic stress syn-



drome memories. With several of his family members dead and close to thirty family members in prison, you know he's been surrounded by violence and the results of violence his whole life.

Yet, his manner is steady. Gentle. Bright. Compassionate. And intelligent. Nane Alejándrez is proof that you can never write anyone off, no matter how lost they may seem or one believes they are. So much human potential and social capital is wasted in America's predilection to criminalize people and youth of color.

Remember the late Chicano poet Abelardo "Lalo" Delgado's great 1969 masterpiece, "Stupid America," which is a plea to slow down, pay attention, and see below the surface in order to find the Nanes of this world and help prepare a place for them. That's what Barrios Unidos does: its whole mission, approach, and work are summarized in that poem's essential message: Don't write anyone off.

I've known Nane for some ten years. I met him in 1995, at a crucial time in my life—two years into my sobriety (I had finally stopped after twenty-seven years of drugs and alcohol). I got to know well his team of healers and organizers: OT (Otilio Quintero), Liz Ayala, Walter Guzmán, Henry Domínguez, Mary Lou Alejándrez, and the others. I met them shortly after beginning to take seriously my art, including the publication of my 1993 best-selling memoir, *Always Running: La Vida Loca, Gang Days in LA*, and to work among troubled urban youth. In 1994, I helped create Chicago's Youth Struggling for Survival (YSS) to help establish more respectful and meaningful relationships among adult mentors, parents, and at-risk youth. In the many years that have followed, Barrios Unidos has become a touchstone for peace, one of the spiritual and cultural centers of the urban peace movement, our teachers.

Like when my own son, Ramiro, got caught up in the web of the crazy life, Nane and Barrios Unidos invited him, YSS members, and the many other people we worked with in Chicago to conferences, peace summits, and dialog. They saved us. They helped my son, despite his later incarceration, to become more mature, creative, spiritual, and aware—even behind bars.

There are several other reasons why I can testify from firsthand experience to the power of healing and reconciliation behind Nane's and Barrios Unidos's intensive peace work. I've been a peace warrior

and activist for more than thirty years—even as a teenage gang-banger and drug user in the streets of my East L.A. area barrio, I eventually found a political and social consciousness in the Chicano Movement that propelled me into trying to end barrio warfare. Prior to that, I had walked out of my middle school during the 1968 East L.A. “Blow-outs” in which thousands of students walked out of public schools to demand better education. I took part in and got arrested during the 1970 Chicano Moratorium against the Vietnam War. I painted murals, helped organize Chicano students, learned Mexican indigenous dances, and helped develop a truce between my barrio and our main enemy barrio.

I left the gang life and drugs soon after committing to revolutionary social, economic, and cultural change. In my mid-twenties I began to lead poetry workshops in prisons, juvenile facilities, schools, and various L.A. barrios through the Barrio Writers Workshops of the L.A. Latino Writers Association.

When I moved to Chicago in 1985, I became active in the vast poetry scene there and lived among hip-hop dancers, MCs, and graffiti artists. I did workshops in homeless shelters, juvenile halls, schools, and prisons. Despite my own battles with alcohol and negative impulses, I kept struggling for more healing, more knowledge, more connections.

In 1993, *Always Running* got published, and everything escalated for me. I gained the opportunity to sit on the national stage and to convey what I had learned all those years (now sober and in a better frame of mind and spirit) to important new audiences. My connection to Nane Alejándrez and Barrios Unidos was vital in keeping me grounded as a person and as an activist.

It was their example, after Barrios elder Magdaleno Rose-Avila ended up working with L.A. gang youth deported to El Salvador, that sparked my efforts to help create Homies Unidos, an international gang peace movement focused primarily on engaging Salvadoran youth across the United States and Central America in healing and transformation work.

Years later, after I had moved back to Los Angeles, Nane and Barrios Unidos attended the opening of Tía Chucha’s Cafe Cultural, the Chicano-oriented bookstore, cafe, art gallery, performance space,

cyber cafe, and workshop center that I helped to establish in the Northeast San Fernando Valley section of the city—the “Mexican” side of the Valley. Nane came with prayers and eagle feathers, presenting me with one in a magical moment captured by a PBS-TV production crew.

I’m honored to have known and worked with Nane and his Barrios Unidos staff and supporters. I thank the Creator that I’m part of such a vital and crucial peace movement.

Sadly, as Nane and the Barrios Unidos family know all too well, being a peace champion is not sexy. It’s not lucrative. It’s often heart-breaking and traumatic. But peace, even just a little bit, even for just a little while, is worth it all. The hope is that the work of healing and transforming ailing lives and broken communities will call to everyone.

*¡Órale pues!* That’s the brand of thinking and spirit that guides Barrios Unidos’s warriors, organizers, teachers, healers, thinkers, and doers. Their work is successful because Barrios Unidos is fundamentally informed by a righteous legacy complementing strategies, traditions, values, talents, and prayers—because they understand the deepest truth: that the arts and the heart are the greatest paths to peace.

*Yocoxcayotl.*

May the Creator bless them, protect them, and guide them for as long as they’re needed, for as long as any of our youth and families are caught up in the madness, dying just to die, with little or nothing to live for, little or nothing to dream, with our communities broken and at each other’s throats. For as long as we have war and uncertainty, that’s how long the truth and beauty of Barrios Unidos should grace our lives with hope, vision, connectedness, and meaning.

Luis J. Rodríguez  
C/S